

Silver Stars Awarded for OIF Actions

Captain (CPT) Charles E. Branson received the Silver Star Medal for gallantry in action for heroism in connection with military operations against a hostile force in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom. CPT Branson distinguished himself while serving as the Commander of A Battery, 1st Battalion, 3rd Air Defense Artillery (A/1-3 ADA), during the battle for Objective Jenkins from 24 to 29 March 2003.

CPT Branson's orders were to secure a bridge near the village of Al Kifalin to enable the brigade to continue its attack. For this mission, in addition to his two Bradley Linebacker platoons, he received a tank platoon from 3-69 Armor as a reserve, a combat observation lasing team (COLT) and a Long-Range Acquisition System (LRAS) team. An Air Defense battery commander leading a Bradley and tank company team in an attack is unprecedented.

Just after midnight on 25 March 2003, CPT Branson's team reached the bridge and immediately received heavy rocket-propelled grenade, small arms and mortar fire. He pulled his forces back and called for Artillery fire to suppress the enemy. He rallied his forces and continued the attack, receiving additional heavy fire. For the next eight hours, CPT Branson continued the attack, calling for artillery fires on three separate occasions and requesting the commitment of the reserve tank platoon, which occurred at 0800 on 25 March 2003.

When Iraqis blew the bridge, CPT Branson ordered his tanks to cross the weakened structure. This action turned the tide of the battle—following additional fire and maneuver, his company team secured the bridgehead, but fierce fighting continued for the next 36 hours. The enemy battle damage assessment for this operation included more than 200 enemy soldiers, 20 technical vehicles and the identification of numerous weapons caches.



Sergeant First Class (SFC) Matthew T. Gruidl received the Silver Star Medal for gallantry in action for heroism in connection with military operations against a hostile force in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom. SFC Gruidl distinguished himself while serving as Platoon Sergeant of 2nd Platoon, A Battery, 1st Battalion, 3rd Air Defense Artillery (2/A/1-3 ADA) from 27 January to June 2003.

On 22 March 2003, Task Force 2-7 Infantry made contact with Iraqi forces in As Samawah. SFC Gruidl, without orders, volunteered to reestablish link up for the lost and separated portion of TF 2-7 convoy that was receiving small-arms fire. With complete disregard for his own safety, he exposed himself to hostile fire, while using his vehicle to shield the lost convoy against sporadic AK-47 fire as he led the convoy out of the hostile area, taking numerous small-arms rounds to his vehicle and himself, to link up with the remainder of the TF 2-7.

On 24 March 2003, A Battery made contact and was ambushed by a large Iraqi force while securing Objective Jenkins. SFC Gruidl engaged numerous hostile forces while leading 2nd Platoon through the ambush.

The next day, SFC Gruidl approached four Iraqi soldiers hiding in a ditch. The Iraqi soldiers immediately exited the ditch, and one ran around the rear of the platoon leader's truck. One of the Iraqi soldiers leapt onto the platoon leader's vehicle. SFC Gruidl exposed himself to direct fire and engaged the Iraqi with a burst of .50-caliber rounds that removed the Iraqi soldier, ultimately saving the lives of the three-man crew.

The Medal

The Silver Star is awarded to a Soldier who, while serving in any capacity with the US Army, is cited for gallantry in action against an enemy of the US while engaged in military operations involving conflict with an opposing foreign force, or while serving with friendly foreign forces engaged in armed conflict against an opposing armed force in which the US is not a belligerent party.

CPT John F. Vanlandingham received the Silver Star Medal for "exceptional meritorious bravery" for actions that saved the lives of several Iraqi National Guardsmen. He distinguished himself while assigned to 1st Battalion, 206th Field Artillery (1-206 FA), Arkansas National Guard, serving as an Advisor to the Iraqi National Guard, in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

CPT Vanlandingham's mission was to train Iraqi National Guard troops to defend their country. On 14 November 2004, he was leading a convoy from an oil refinery back to a US area of operations north of Taji, Iraq, including about 50 Iraqi National Guard troops in several vehicles that had no protective armor, making the vehicles and occupants susceptible to improvised explosive devices (IEDs).

Two IEDs exploded, signaling an ambush, and several insurgents began attacking with small-arms fire. CPT Vanlandingham's vehicle, the convoy lead, escaped the ambush and motored to safety, but he and the troops with him immediately realized that the Iraqi soldiers were caught in the attack.

CPT Vanlandingham directed American forces to suppress the enemy fire as he made his way into a ditch and back toward the Iraqi troops, retrieving several wounded and at least one dead Iraqi soldier along with several weapons. After accounting for all personnel, he reorganized the convoy, leading the way back to the US area of operations to secure medical treatment for the wounded. The Iraqi troops had suffered severe injuries, and without quick medical attention, they likely would have died.

Without regard to his own personal safety, CPT Vanlandingham's actions saved the lives of several Iraqi National Guard soldiers. He is the third Arkansas Guardsman to earn the Silver Star while deployed in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom.